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Classified By: CG Daniel Weygandt for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[11](#). (U) This is a joint Consulate General Milan/Embassy Rome cable.

[12](#). (C) Summary: Blunt assessments of local, national, and foreign policy issues emerged from a lunch the Consul General hosted for senior Milan-based national and EU political figures. In Milan, the imbroglio over the EXPO is exposing the Mayor's weaknesses and tensions with Rome. Nationally, the collapse of the center-left opposition may also weaken Berlusconi's coalition. On foreign policy the guests delivered clear messages: the United States should engage Syria and Italy was doing all it can in Afghanistan. We plan to host additional events like this to try and elicit viewpoints from national figures that may differ from those heard in Rome. End summary.

Looks Who's Coming to Lunch

[13](#). (C) Three senior Milan-based national politicians from Berlusconi's People of Liberty (PdL) coalition) former Milan mayor Gabriele Albertini, local journalist turned parliamentarian Giorgio Stracquadanio, and Lombardy Senator (and Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs) Alfredo Mantica) sat down with the Consul General on February 23. Though all are now working in Rome or Brussels, they give a Milan-flavored point of view on local, national, and foreign policy priorities.

Milan - EXPO 2015 Stalemate

[14](#). (SBU) Planning for EXPO 2015, which Milan was awarded with great fanfare nearly a year ago, has become a political briar patch for Milan Mayor Letizia Moratti. As we'll report in septel, EXPO management problems illustrate fundamental tensions between Milan's leadership and the national government in Rome) a tension that we've also seen flare up in the context of the restructuring of Alitalia (see reftel for details).

[15](#). (SBU) All agreed that the lack of progress on plans for the EXPO is a serious problem for Mayor Moratti. The failure of the Mayor to get her nominee (and right-hand man) Paolo Glisenti approved as a managing director for the project has been politically embarrassing. Equally embarrassing has been her inability to get the treasury to release funds desperately needed to get the show on the road. Though the funding iceberg may be melting, the quid pro quo appears to be Glisenti's head) a Pyrrhic victory for the Mayor. All around the table agreed that whatever popular acclaim Moratti gained from winning the EXPO for Milan has all but worn off.

¶6. (SBU) We note that at least Albertini's views on this may be tainted by his own political ambitions. He remains very popular from his time as mayor prior to Moratti. Though prevented by term limits from extending his tenure, he may be preparing a return to Milan politics, possibly as the center right candidate for the Province of Milan in the June elections.

Coming Together is Difficult without a Common Foe

¶7. (C) Turning to national political issues, our guests talked at length about the future of the PdL in the absence of a real opposition movement. None doubted that the merger between Forza Italia (FI) and National Alliance (AN) parties would go ahead, but they noted that the weakness of the center left was not necessarily a benefit for Berlusconi. With a solid majority and no real opposition the governing coalition can pass easily through parliament anything it wants. Ironically, according to Stracquadanio, therein lies the problem. Though allies on the center right, AN and FI (still separate forces in the PdL) and coalition partner the Northern League do not agree on much.

¶8. (C) Embassy contacts in Rome have pointed to the fact that a working opposition is also necessary for the government to push through some of its major planned reforms, including judicial reform and parliamentary procedure reform. We note that without a credible opposition, the center right will be less focused on its agenda and will spend more time on internal bickering. In the north, PdL particularly fears losing support to the Northern League. As AN continues its progress toward the mainstream, some AN militants have told the Embassy that the Northern League is increasingly attractive because of its tough law and order and anti-illegal immigrant positions.

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Frank Foreign Policy Advice

¶9. (C) As the meal proceeded, the Consul General took on board some rather unexpected foreign policy advice. Most notably, Mantica stressed that the time for engagement with Syria was now. He said the Syrians would be open to a dialogue and could be helpful on the Israeli-Palestinian question. He lamented that we thought it necessary for the Syrians to pull out immediately from Lebanon, saying they had provided stability there for years. A better approach would have been a staged pullout over a number of years to give the Lebanese time to adjust. He mentioned, however, that Syria could still play a positive role in Lebanon. We note that the decision for Italian troops to go into Lebanon under UNIFIL was made by the previous center-left government. Mantica's statements, thus, may be based on the desire to find a graceful way to pull out Italian troops.

¶10. (C) On Afghanistan, Mantica was skeptical about progress towards a fully functioning democracy in that country. He maintained that Afghanistan still had not made any serious steps beyond tribalism. He highlighted Italian support for the Afghan mission to date, but said that more important than the number of the Italian soldiers was their function. He stated that the Italian government had basically shifted its presence from a peacekeeping force to what he characterized as a "full-on attack" group. He implied that the GOI was extremely satisfied with its presence in Afghanistan and was not prepared to do more. We note that MFA Undersecretary positions are political plums that are distributed within the ruling coalition but they are not always particularly influential. Though Mantica's take on both Syria and Afghanistan is not an uncommon one, the thrust of official MFA policy in both areas is much more positive and closely aligned with our own.

Biographical Notes

¶11. (SBU) Alfredo Mantica was born July 17, 1943 in Rimini. He is currently the Undersecretary for Foreign affairs responsible for relations with European and former Soviet states. Has been politically active in AN since 1987 and is known as one of Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa's main men in Milan. He has a reputation for being analytical and incisive. He is a strong supporter of the United States and focuses on strengthening and using his friendships with international leaders.

¶12. (SBU) Gabriele Albertini was born on July 6, 1950 in Milan. He graduated with a law degree in 1974 and took over the family's metalworking business. He was elected to two terms as mayor of Milan (1997-2006). Even after leaving office, he has remained active on local issues such as traffic and pollution. He is known for his independent disposition and retains a strong popular backing in Lombardy. He is currently an EU parliamentarian with Forza Italia.

¶13. (SBU) Giorgio Stracquadanio was born on March 22, 1959 in Milan. Before being elected to the Senate in 2006, he was a journalist, contributing primarily to the newspapers "Libero" and "Il Tempo." He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in ¶2008. Since 2007 he has been the deputy chairman of Fondazione Italia USA. He represents Forza Italia and is close to Berlusconi. He is known in the media as "The Spin Doctor" and for being PM Berlusconi's ghostwriter.

Comment: Back Home in Milano

¶14. (C) Though these three individuals have made it on the broader political stage, and have close ties to the ruling class of Rome, their Milan connections remain strong. Back home) freed from the confines of Rome and Brussels) they advanced points of view on national and foreign policy issues that differ from the official line. The Consul General has scheduled events with similar political figures from the Northern League and the Democratic Party in hopes of encouraging an equally open "just between us Milanese" dialogue.
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